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Viewing cable 09BANGKOK2849, THAILAND-CAMBODIA SPAT: RTG RECALLS AMBASSADOR TO PROTEST HUN SEN'S NAMING OF THAKSIN AS ADVISER

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09BANGKOK2849	2009-11-06 10:14	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bangkok

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/247619/wikileaks>

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RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 7257

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002849

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2019

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SUBJECT: THAILAND-CAMBODIA SPAT: RTG RECALLS AMBASSADOR TO PROTEST HUN SEN'S NAMING OF THAKSIN AS ADVISER

REF: A. BANGKOK 2746 (THAKSIN MOVES)
B. PHNOM PENH 815 (HUN SEN MANEUVERS OVER POSSIBLE THAKSIN VISIT)
C. BANGKOK 2844 (CHAVALIT'S SOUTHERN GAMBIT)

BANGKOK 00002849 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: The Royal Thai Government recalled its Ambassador to Cambodia late November 5 and announced a review of all diplomatic engagement in protest of Cambodian PM Hun Sen's naming of fugitive Thai ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra as an economic adviser. The decision, which led to a dramatic

spike in public support for the government, came hours after Foreign Minister Kasit laid out Thai concerns to visiting EAP DAS Scot Marciel and asked for U.S. intervention with Hun Sen to back off his unhelpful intervention in Thai domestic politics. Thai contacts are unanimous in suggesting PM Abhisit had to take measures in response to the increasingly bold Hun Sen-Thaksin collaboration, that the diplomatic moves were measured, and that Thailand will now await Hun Sen's next step. Thai military sources offered reassurances that border commanders continue to talk to each other, and that there are no plans for additional military preparations. That said, PM Abhisit and Army Commander Anupong reportedly discussed scenarios and options mid-day November 5, with Anupong assuring Abhisit that the Thai military was prepared in the ""worst case"" scenario if Hun Sen were to initiate a provocative military action.

¶2. (C) Comment: At least for now, it would appear that Thaksin, opposition Puea Thai Chairman Chavalit, and Hun Sen have miscalculated how the gambit to name Thaksin an adviser to the Cambodian government, and possibly travel to Cambodia (refs A-B), would play in the Thai domestic context. A snap poll conducted after the Ambassadorial recall decision indicated that popularity for Abhisit's government soared nearly 300% overnight, from 23.3% to 68.6%, even increasing to over 50% in the northeast, the bastion of pro-Thaksin support and located near Cambodia. Voices across the Thai spectrum, with the exception of core Thaksin supporters, have been uniformly harsh in criticism of the trio -- first and foremost Hun Sen, with prominent mention of how his incendiary January 2003 comments led to the torching of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh and Thai businesses throughout Cambodia -- but also Chavalit and Thaksin. We suggest taking advantage of the upcoming meetings in Singapore (APEC, US-ASEAN Leader's Meeting) to schedule pull-asides with Thai and Cambodian leaders to urge de-escalation of the rhetoric and a re-engagement. End Summary and Comment

FM Kasit to DAS Marciel: can you help with Hun Sen?

¶3. (C) FM Kasit told visiting DAS Marciel and DCM early November 5, prior to the decision to recall the Thai Ambassador to Cambodia, that Cambodian PM Hun Sen's recent actions, culminating in the November 4 appointment of Thaksin Shinawatra as an economic adviser, were not merely a personal affair, but intervention in Thai domestic politics, including the strategic struggle between Thaksin and institution of monarchy; as a result, ""all of Thai society was up in arms.""

¶4. (C) Referencing Chavalit's trip to Cambodia on the eve of the October 23-25 ASEAN Summit in Thailand and Hun Sen's incendiary comments upon arrival in Thailand October 23, FM Kasit told DAS Marciel that Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Thai military officials had met Hun Sen on October 24 for two and a half hours on the margins of the Summit to try to impress upon the Cambodian PM the gravity of inviting Thaksin to Cambodia as an adviser. Since the direct, private Thai appeal to Hun Sen to de-escalate the rhetoric and avoid unhelpful actions had failed, Kasit asked the USG to assist by suggesting to Hun Sen to ""stop this mad game.""

¶5. (C) DAS Marciel told Kasit that the U.S. wanted to maintain good relations with both Thailand and Cambodia, hoped for a peaceful, bilateral resolution to the issue, but did not view Hun Sen's comments and naming of Thaksin as aimed at improving relations with Thailand. Kasit warned that Hun Sen's actions were particularly provocative for conservative elements and the military, who believed that Thaksin aimed to bring down the Thai monarchy. Considering the seriousness of such a goal and the implications for domestic politics, Hun Sen should not meddle with what was a Thai internal issue.

¶6. (C) Kasit opined that Hun Sen had calculated that, with the return to the Thai political arena of General Chavalit Yongchayudh -- a former Prime Minister who October 1 joined the opposition Puea Thai party as Chairman -- elections would be held in Thailand soon and result in Thaksin loyalists returning to power, allowing him to benefit from ""transactional diplomacy." " Hun Sen was likely impatient regarding the pace of bilateral dialogue concerning 4.6 square kilometers of disputed territory in the area around Preah Vihear temple and overlapping claims in the Gulf Thailand that could hold substantial oil and gas reserves, said Kasit. Kasit suggested Hun Sen's frustration was based on falsely held beliefs that Preah Vihear could be developed into a tourist destination such as Disneyland and that the Democrat-led Thai government would not come to an agreement with Hun Sen over the territorial disputes.

17. (C) Kasit suggested to DAS Marciel that Hun Sen had a team dedicated to analyzing the Thai press coverage of Cambodia, and that Hun Sen and the Cambodian Ambassador to Bangkok mistakenly judged that the Thai press was under the control of the government, or worse, answered to his/Kasit's directions. "Hun Sen just does not understand that Thailand is an open society, and the Foreign Minister does not write editorials," he added, before alleging that a Phnom Penh newspaper recently attacked Thai King Bhumibol, a development Kasit termed "unfortunate."

18. (C) Referencing the extensive development assistance that Thailand continued to provide Cambodia, Kasit lamented the recent deterioration in the bilateral dynamic. Kasit concluded the Cambodian portion of the discussion by saying that he would soon be meeting PM Abhisit to discuss next steps, adding that he expected he would have to "throw a fit" several hours later (note: presumably a reference to informing the Cambodians of the recall of the Thai Ambassador. Septel will cover the rest of the Kasit-Marciel discussion).

Decision to recall Ambassador, discuss options

19. (C) The subsequent Abhisit-chaired meeting included Kasit, Army Commander Anupong, DPM Suthep, National Security Council Sec-Gen Thawin, and Defense Minister Prawit. The Thai resolved that a response to Hun Sen's action was essential, but that it should be limited to diplomatic measures, including the recall of their Ambassador to Cambodia and a review/suspension of current diplomatic negotiations with Cambodia. However, Thai leaders decided not to raise military alerts, move to close the border, or limit border trade, according to our sources. Furthermore, Abhisit requested that Kasit himself not call in the Cambodian Ambassador to deliver the news, but to have the DG for East Asia to do so, to avoid the controversial Kasit becoming a part of the most recent narrative and keeping the focus squarely on Hun Sen and Thaksin. (Note: we think keeping Kasit out of action was a wise move.)

10. (C) Abhisit specifically asked Army Commander Anupong about the military's assessment of the border situation and various scenarios, according to our sources. While the whole group agreed it was unlikely the rhetorical-diplomatic spat would escalate into conflict, Abhisit supposedly asked Anupong whether the Thai army were prepared in case Hun Sen initiated military action. Anupong, who recently carried out a reshuffle of colonels commanding key units along the border, replied that the Thai army was prepared to respond if necessary.

Thai domestic reaction - closing ranks, irritated, but calm

11. (C) Thai civilian and military officials that we have talked to November 5-6 emphasized the border situation remained calm, and that they expected the dispute would stay in diplomatic channels. Sisaket Governor Rapi Phongbupakhit and Sakeao Governor Sanit Nauksuksi separately told us that the border situations in their provinces remained calm, with border checkpoints and trade proceeding as usual, and that there had been no special troop movements in their provinces. LTG Nipat Thonglek, head of the Border Division of the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF), assured us that Thai and Cambodian border commanders continued their constant dialogue, and that there was no increased tension in military postures or need for additional Thai deployments, a sentiment echoed by numerous other military contacts.

12. (C) Many Thai commentators, speculating on the whirl of activity initiated by Puea Thai Chair Chavalit in recent weeks, have suggested that the aim of the Cambodia gambit of Hun Sen and Thaksin was to put sufficient pressure on Abhisit's coalition government to force it to step down and call new elections, which Puea Thai was confident it would win; this is certainly what Democrat party insiders suggest to us was the dynamic in play.

13. (SBU) If that is indeed the case, the gambit seems to have backfired. Public reaction to the latest back and forth November 4-5, with the exception of core Thaksin supporters, has been uniformly critical of Hun Sen, Thaksin, and Chavalit, with support for Abhisit's government soaring overnight. Many commentators and figures who have been increasingly critical of the Abhisit government's inability to lead the country forward on a coherent agenda have closed ranks in recent days in support of the government on the Hun Sen-Thaksin issue, with frequent mentions of past examples of Hun Sen's alleged thuggery, from the January 2003 comments which led to the torching of the Thai embassy and Thai

businesses, to the late 1990s ""self-coup"" that allowed Hun Sen to press his advantage against domestic rival Prince Ranariddh.

¶14. (U) Note: DAS Marciel did not have the opportunity to review this cable.

JOHN